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Friday,  
November 3, 1967**HUMANISM, CONTENTION AND SEX**

*Humanism, Christianity and Sex* was the title of a forum organised by the National Secular Society at Conway Hall, London, October 11, which proved the success its title and array of distinguished speakers promised.

Three quite distinct humanist views were contributed by Brigid Brophy, David Tribe and Leo Abse, MP, while, in the absence of Westminster Abbey's Archdeacon Carpenter, the sole voice for Christendom was heard from Father Thomas Corbishly the well-known Jesuit priest and writer.

Regardless of provocation, the Rev. A. B. Downing, editor of the Unitarian paper *The Inquirer*, withheld his personal views and acted very properly, and capably, as Chairman.

The audience of over 400, be-spotted by nuns and divided by notions, behaved—with one memorable exception—with a composure and courtesy unusual at a meeting where audience-participation was so active and contentious so differed.

Father Corbishly recognised there were large areas of sexual activity not directed to the production of life which the Catholic Church had greatly ignored in the past. He was anxious to make it clear that his Church now saw the value of sexual pleasure, "sex is fun", but insisted that a hedonist attitude which valued sex only for the pleasure it gave overlooked and undermined the importance of the procreative aspect.

Miss Brophy, whose ideas regarding sex and sexual morality are becoming widely known through her writings and TV appearances, felt that Father Corbishly seemed to see sex as always the same experience. It was neither consistently, nor necessarily, a solemn procedure. Sexual activity could be deeply significant or frivolous, and the latter was no more improper than the former. To use and be used with consent, frivolously or otherwise, was one of the highest compliments one person could pay another. What was really immoral was the irresponsible production of unwanted children and, while traditional strictures may have lent some control in the past, in this technological age they were as unnecessary as they were undesirable.

The first two speakers, with either an inability to reach—or an aversion to—the microphones, were perhaps not

quite audible in the far reaches of the hall. But the tireless Humanist campaigner, David Tribe, NSS President, having no such problems or aversions, came over loud and clear.

The human capacity for sex was far in excess of the biological need, and this, said Mr Tribe, created a number of major problems which have been complicated and worsened by religious influence. We should recognise the wide patterns of behaviour—the abnormal as well as the normal—as natural. There should also be recognition of the essential equality of the sexes, removal of the stigma on illegitimate children and an obligation upon all to minimise venereal diseases and the birth of unwanted children. The Humanist attitude to sex demands that sexual knowledge should be free to all, the cultivation of an increased sense of social responsibility, and fuller consideration for the rights and freedom of individuals.

Mr Abse took yet another line drawing his differences with both Father Corbishly and Miss Brophy. As a Jew, Mr Abse attributes his humanism to being brought up to believe in an early Judaism where there was "no trace of the conception of a duality of body and soul. The individual dies as a whole, and nothing survives."

"Despite all the assaults that were made in Jewish history on the importance of the body—assaults that were made, for example by the Essenes, assaults that were made by the celibate Christ, by the noisy neurotic Jew, Paul—despite the injections of Christian attitudes, of the antipathies to the flesh of the Middle Ages by the ascetic, Jewish, capitalist, cabalistic sects—despite all that, the fact is that there has always been within Judaism a dissenting element which is making an emphasis

upon the physical hold we need upon life."

It was characteristic of this Jewish element, exemplified by numerous great Jewish psychologists, to challenge the Christian denial of sex which is embodied in the traditions of "the celibate Christ, the Virgin Mary, the unwed nuns, and the unmarried priests".

Mr Abse dealt at some length with the "romantic" views earlier expressed by Miss Brophy, declaring his regret that Miss Brophy had need to leave early and was therefore unable to hear his objections or respond to them. No doubt such regret was to be equally shared later by Miss Brophy also.

A flaw in the meeting was the imbalance between Christian and Humanist speakers, balance being desirable in view of the title. It is uncertain, of course, that two more Christian speakers would have contributed any more than Father Corbishly, and this was regrettably little. However, Humanists are quite used to meeting insubstantial opposition from Christians and may usually be counted upon, as in this instance, to test each other's views. It was in this way the meeting proved of considerable interest and value. As a result, and if it proves feasible, a digested transcript of the discussion will be published at a later date.

**IN BRIEF**

THE National Secular Society has published three new leaflets by David Tribe. They are *The Scandal of Religious Broadcasting*, *Universal Affirmation* and *School Morality Without Religion*. Copies are available free of charge from the NSS, 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1.

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Luton Humanist Group has affiliated to the National Secular Society, and an application for affiliation has been received from the Cambridge Humanists.

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The Rules and Constitution of the National Secular Society are to be revised. Proposals should be sent to the Society by branches and members only, as soon as possible.

**FREETHINKER**Published by G. W. Foote & Co. Ltd.  
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National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1. Telephone HOP 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Letter Network (International) and Humanist Postal Book Service (secondhand books bought and sold). For information or catalogue send 6d stamp to Kit Mouat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

**OUTDOOR**

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mound)—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN, MCRAE and MURRAY.

Manchester Branch NSS, Platt Fields, Sunday afternoon, 3 p.m.; Car Park, Victoria Street, Sunday evenings, 8 p.m.

Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.: Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

**INDOOR**

Birmingham Branch NSS (Midland Institute, Margaret Street), Sunday, November 5th, 6.45 p.m.: DEREK SOUTHALL, "Buddhism".

The Cambridge Humanists (Mill Lane Lecture Rooms), Friday, 3rd November, 8.30 p.m.: Dr ELIZABETH SCHOENBERG, "The Prevalence of Brotherly Love"; 27 Portugal Street, Wednesday, November 8th, 8.30 p.m. Subject: "Anarchism or State Socialism".

Brighton and Hove Humanist Group (Regency House, Oriental Place, Brighton), Sunday, November 5th, 5.30 p.m.: RUPERT TOWNSEND ROSE, "Divorce: Past, Present and Future".

Havering Humanist Society (The Social Centre, Gubbins Lane, Harold Wood), Tuesday, November 7th, 8 p.m.: TULLEY POTTER, "Britain—Searching for a New Messiah?".

Leicester Secular Society (Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate), Sunday, November 5th, 6.30 p.m.: BASIL BRADLAUGH BONNER, "Towards a Better Hospital Service".

Luton Humanist Group (Carnegie Room, Central Library), Thursday, November 9th, 8 p.m.: ROY BREWER, "How Mass Communications are Manipulated".

Manchester Humanist Society (36 George Street), Wednesday, November 8th, 7.30 p.m.: GORDON GRAY, "The Origins of Life".

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall Humanist Centre, Red Lion Square, London, WC1), Sunday, November 5th, 11 a.m.: F. H. AMPHLETT MICKLEWRIGHT, "Ethics and the Law"; Tuesday, November 7th, 6.45 p.m.: Various speakers, "Youth and Education".

South Place Sunday Concerts (Conway Hall, London), Sunday, November 5th, 6.30 p.m. Dartington String Quartet. Haydn, Britten, Schubert. Admission 4/-

West Ham Branch NSS (Wanstead and Woodford Community Centre, Wanstead, London, E11). Meetings at 8 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of every month.

ONCE AGAIN the FREETHINKER changes editor. With an expression of unutterable relief, David Collis makes his well-earned departure, while Karl Hyde, trying to appear composed, views the mountain of correspondence with inner dismay. Colin McCall, David Tribe, Kit Mouat, David Collis and all former editors will recall both these positions, and if they now chuckle at my predicament, well, let them—they have earned the right.

Until today, editorship of the FREETHINKER was a part-time, unpaid job. This may not be generally known and a few words about it, at this stage, would not be out of place.

Most regular readers are fully aware of the essential part the FREETHINKER has played in the broad Freethought/Humanist Movement over the past eighty-six years. Most are aware of its many successful contributions to the Movement's projects and reforms. While this paper was in existence there was hope for the tireless reformers whose campaigns brought benefits we now enjoy. It is not nearly so widely appreciated how frequently the FREETHINKER came near to collapse.

Former editors are among those who stepped forward to maintain this paper at times when it may have floundered. For this, all who value Freethought and Humanism owe them a debt of gratitude. We cannot gauge the inconveniences and real difficulties created by this work in their private lives. There could be no lapses, no let-ups; the demand on their time was constant; the FREETHINKER had to meet its deadline; they never let it fail to do so. Each, it is fairly certain, received letters of abuse from a persistent crank minority; each, it is quite certain, never received their due in praise and gratitude. They gave their time, labour, care and special abilities freely to the Movement. What could better signify real Humanist service? Real Humanism in action? There are thousands, I am sure, who would join me in this tribute of admiration and expression of thanks to them all.

THIS EDITORIAL is being written on the first day of my appointment as editor. The immediate concern is to bring this number to press; there are three days in which to complete it. A change of editor, and major changes in working-arrangements, means much time-consuming work not directly connected with normal editorial duties. This is mentioned to explain, though not excuse, the delay in answering correspondence and in acknowledging contributed material.

A change in editor frequently promises, or forewarns, of impending changes in policy and in the general shape of the paper. Very soon, a statement of policy will be published, and certain changes will be introduced as circumstances permit. There can be no sudden changes, *but changes there will be.*

Former editors and contributors deserve acknowledgement for their support of the paper in the past, but mention of those upon whom the FREETHINKER most depended for its existence is left to the end. I refer, of course, to the faithful regular readers whose consistent support has carried this paper safely through its greatest trials. With thanks to you, the FREETHINKER has surmounted its worst obstacles and now, gladly viewing a far wider free-thinking humanist society than it knew in its early days, it makes the necessary adjustments befitting the situation before pushing forward in its constant campaign on behalf of Freethought and Humanism.

# A MATHEMATICIAN'S COMPLAINTS ABOUT WRITINGS ON ETHICS

M. J. O'Carrol

## 1. Presentation

IT is often a surprise to me to discover the length of prose used to express a relatively simple idea in philosophy. The lack of a concise summary (or outline of main ideas) dismay me. There is a place for elaboration, but if long it should be clearly labelled for what it is and should not obscure the main theme.

Crystallisation of concepts and representation by symbols or abbreviations is well worth the resemblance to corny pop psychology when you consider the gains in clarity and memorability. Subheadings have the journalistic effect of sugaring a hardly-digestible pill and make for easy back-reference and synopsis.

May I ask your serious (non-propagandist) contributors to inform rather than impress. Sometimes I get the feeling that quotations from classical authors are motivated by pretentiousness and add little to the argument. Elegance, yes, but not at the expense of clarity. I prefer something clumsy but to the point and nontrivial to something flamboyant and obscure.

## 2. Absolutism (of thought) and Uniquism

### (a) ABSOLUTISM

Theories of applied philosophy (or applied mathematics; there is no clear distinction) are necessarily inexact and approximate, although they may be accurate enough for useful constructions to be made (mechanical, social, economical, etc.). An applied theory seeks to describe real events. Early theories are generally crude, based on simple models of real structures. As refinements become more elaborate the theory becomes a more accurate description of reality. It seems to me that ethics (not that I am well informed) is at the crude stage.

Most theories in this crude stage have suffered misrepresentation as "absolute truths" (e.g., Newton's mechanics, Euclid's geometry, etc.). Often there have been religious connections. Science has overcome this handicap, recognising that all measurement (and observation of real events) is necessarily inexact, it knows there is no such thing as "absolute truth" in science. It seeks to improve the degree of accuracy of theories to real observations by both modifying the theories and improving the observations. Misrepresentation as "absolute truth" I shall call "absolutism".

### (b) UNIQUISM

There appears to be a human tendency to over-emphasise the importance of a novel idea. Sometimes this becomes an obsession and all other relevant ideas are eliminated in the face of a prime principle. This tendency is no doubt involved in "conversion" to religious or political groups. In thought on all kinds of topics there is this undercurrent seeking "The hidden truth", "The secret of success", etc. If a good secret emerges it is pounced upon as *the* thing. Misrepresentation of an idea as the only possible one I will call "uniquism".

### (c) ELABORATION

Uniquism and Absolutism go readily together, especially in political, religious and philosophical communications. Rationalists should be their strong opponents. Often the

tendency is undeclared (explicitly) and seems subconscious. The influence of these tendencies is reflected in fashion in modern thought. In a rather unstable way, new ideas take a grip on philosophy to the exclusion of others, later to fall in the next wave of fashion-change. Rarely does the over-riding outlook of the philosophical world seem to result from an averaged consideration of all it has learned. The novel idea often seems grossly overweighted in importance. Psychology seems to be emerging from this condition now that theories are becoming more refined and experimental methods more rigorous.

The tendency toward Absolutism and Uniquism is easy to understand. I do not think there is a case for saying it foreshadows an inherent property of reality. Absolutism and Uniquism are a first crude step in applied thought. They provide a simple basis for analysis and there is a glamorous attraction about the 'eureka' idea.

## 3. Ethics

By a "system of ethics" I mean a system of rules to optimise conditions in some society. I shall be more specific about optimality and society.

### (a) SOCIETY

By a *Society* I shall mean a theoretical set of people with (generally) simple criteria for happiness, comfort, misery, etc., a simple structure for supply and distribution of material affecting these, and other simple properties. Real-society will be declared as such. A Society may be in various *States*; a State will be an assignment of values to all possible properties of all individuals (i.e., a distribution of amounts of happiness, etc., over the members of the Society).

### (b) OPTIMALITY

A set of Optimality Principles (OP's) is defined relative to a Society such that the various States of the Society form an ordered set (with possible equality). Position in this order is measured by a "Goodness" number. It may be worthwhile extending this idea so that the set has a sort of multiple ordering which prevents comparison of some pairs of States but allows it of others.

Such Principles are easy to construct on simple Societies. Immediate ideas are maximal survival, minimal greatest-individual-suffering, a food/population ratio of a least a certain amount, etc.

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## (c) REALITY

For useful application the aim of these constructions is to approximate reality. As in all applied science, a theoretical Society is necessarily an inexact representation of Real-society.

There is no set of Real Optimality Principles. There are subjective, isolated OP's, but useful collections of them would order the States of Real-society. Theoretically, the set of all subjective OP's could yield an objective set of OP's by using some objective measure of central tendency. [Analogously, height is an individual property but average height is a communal one.]

## (d) ETHICS, RIGHTS AND DUTIES

An optimisation process involves many more things than knowing about the optimum. Analogously many scientific "steady-state" problems may have solutions which are not realisable. They may be unstable in the face of small perturbations of conditions. The same with Utopias. However some ethical principles may follow readily from a simple Society with simple OP's. As the approximation to reality improves, the ethical problem becomes more dynamic and "unsteady".

*Incidentally* it may serve better to develop a theory with different *strengths* for rights and duties, abandoning the simplicity of making all rights and duties absolute to everyone. For example, in a simple model of a Society of a small number of people, whose whole welfare depended exclusively on one commodity, suppose the only OP was that the goodness of the Society was equal to the amount of the commodity possessed by the individual who had least. Suppose also that individuals acquired the commodity by chance, except when it was given by another

individual. All except the poorest have a duty to give to the poorest. The strength of the duty increases according to the wealth of the giver relative to the average, relative to the poorest and relative to the amount to be given, tending to zero as the amount given would make the giver equal poorest.

*Also incidentally*, a Society would be a more accurate model of reality if it had a network of subclasses of its members: men, women, children, embryos, possible future conceptions, incurable and unconscious, insane, criminal, etc. A refined system of ethics upon this would involve rights and duties of different strengths for different subclasses (e.g., the right to drive a car would be weaker for alcoholics).

## 4. A. C. Thompson's Social-Survival Optimality

This is in the first place a very brief idea and presumably is meant to over-ride all other considerations of misery, happiness, etc. It seems to be presented with absolutism and uniqueness. A. C. Thompson appears to make no distinction between survival of individuals and survival of a society (i.e., the society is an aggregate of individuals and social features are not of importance). This should lead to a maximum population probably suffering most appalling conditions. I am sure this is not like a central tendency of individuals' subjective optimalities. This Social Survival principle would even render contraception unethical, and we would have a duty to produce as many children as possible.

Much more comprehensive theories are required before ethical systems can usefully be constructed to approach the many important moral problems of today.

**BASIC RIGHTS OF CHILDREN**

Joseph H. Hird

"ONE may cite immediately the right to life," says A. C. Thompson, "the right to membership in his society." This assumes that society and rights originated together, and ignores that stage through which our ancestors passed as 'barbarians'. They had a society without rights, controlled by strength and cunning, but collaborating instinctively for survival, as jackals associate in packs to hunt down antelopes.

Rights came after the beginning of reflection, the ability to remember past action and its consequences, and deduce the advantage of repeating, varying, or not repeating the same action. This new capacity did not supersede the earlier way of life. It was added, alternating with and modifying it.

The conception of unwanted children arises out of a lapse into the still persisting barbaric stage of pure instinct.

The consequences of this behaviour must be dealt with by the mother, possibly with the help of the father, and/or by society. The mother, if she feels a need to act on her own, may wish to remain integrated as a mother in society, and hope that the child will be accepted, or, for the sake of reputation, or for material reasons, she may reject motherhood and abandon or kill the baby. If she takes this course, she acknowledges that the child has no rights. Her action is a reversion to barbarism.

If society takes over, it is not necessarily granting rights. With persistent over-population or even in a temporary

shortage of food, survival of children is denied or precarious. The Spartans exercised a kind of delayed-action birth-control by exposure, though they later changed their policy to the opposite and penalised bachelors or men who married late. In some communities girls have been rejected or sold.

If the right to live is granted, the motive is ethical, and the community granting this right faces the question of the cost in care and money. Our present method is either to force responsibility on to the parent or parents, and, if necessary give aid from public or charity funds, or, by adoption, to eliminate parental responsibility.

Social stability may break down, however, into political chaos. Excessive power may come into the hands of an individual. Then, instead of rights, there will be duties. Hitler told German women to breed abundantly. These children would "have the right to membership of their society" but no rights as individuals.

Rights are not basic. They are founded on the convenience and generosity of society as a whole, and children's rights cannot be put into a separate category. Even in a country long civilised, respect for children as individuals comes slowly. We need not look far back to find that tired children fell asleep in our mills, were 'bought' from the workhouse to go up chimneys, and to crawl in mines.

The task of rearing unwanted children will not necessarily be accepted. Under stress our species could revert to instinctive life, dropping all ethical considerations.

## MINI-SKIRT VERSUS MYSTERY

Freda Bentley

TO judge by the chaotic state of affairs exposed in the radio broadcast (October 4th) "The Catholic Dilemma: a Report by Anne Owen on Roman Catholic opinion in England today", the RC Church seems to have sold her birthright for a mess of Poppage.

Side by side with the traditional *Old Catholic* views supported by the suave Auberger Waugh, and the case for 'mystery, the unknown, the numinous, imagination, appeal to the senses—not contradicting but *outside* reason', etc., stated by emotional Magdalen Goffin, seethed a cauldron of common folk's bewilderment, discontent, disillusionment, incipient despair.

The frantic efforts of the Church to be 'with it' have landed her in such a state of confusion that Catholics are no longer sure of what to believe. Conversions are dwindling because (1) the monolithic image that once inspired confidence is laid in the dust: (2) the pagan appeal to the senses through mystery, ritual and sentiment (what one lady described as 'the female side of Catholicism') has largely surrendered to the Pop ideal, and thus become repellent rather than attractive to the god-seekers and mystically-inclined. The Scarlet Woman of tradition was alluring and magnificent, if ruthless: her victims were beguiled by a *persona* of sensuous appeal cunningly enhanced by austerity. Now, half in and half out of a mini-skirt, she cuts a ludicrous figure that pleases no one. (Except the rare species Waugh, nurtured in the hothouse of 'upper middle-class English Catholicism', immune to vulgar change, emerging from the adolescent test of Apologetics—which 'showed where other faiths went wrong'—secure in spiritual superiority, 'deeply aware of being Catholic and proud of it!')

Pope John's untimely death put a spoke in the wheel of ecumenism and toppled the cart into a rut. Paul Johnson lamented the consequent 'stagnation', 'paralysis'; and this seems to be the actual condition of the Church under all the feverish surface agitation. Pope Paul's obstinate determination to 'work out every single problem in his own head' results in 'no decision ever being taken': thus 'John's work is undone' and 'the Church is undermined'.

The vexed question of mixed marriages remains unresolved, except for the 'promise' concession, and an occasional softening of authority in individual cases: it was described as 'the greatest obstacle to ecumenism'. On the never-ending topic of birth control, schizophrenia rages. For and against were fairly equally matched in this broadcast.

One woman said she had 'given herself to God to accept as many children as he willed to send'. 'He gave in good measure', she added, happily: 'I had twelve!' A man said he thought *all* forms of family limitation should be allowed. Another remarked ominously that 'one can have too much freedom: freedom to sin; freedom to be damned!' A third said that frequent sex reminded him of the Roman vomitorium! A woman thought that 'the Church must be wondering now if she has been wrong about these things all along'. Another complained of 'belonging to a Club and not being told what the rules are'. One could discern, even in this minute cross-section, the confusion brought upon his people by Paul's ineptitude.

The only tangible concession affecting the body of the Faithful is the change to the vernacular in the Liturgy. This, far from proving an unmixed blessing, turns out to be a bone of contention. Few speakers were in favour.

Most felt that 'dignity has gone with the Latin'. 'The big difference', someone mourned, 'is that one no longer *believes* what is said'. In the mother tongue scripture and liturgy sound 'pedestrian, wooden, leaden, boring, dull—and *incredible*!' 'Archaic language is imperative to preserve *mystery*, and a willing suspension of disbelief'—by which means alone, apparently, the believer is enabled to swallow the *agape* of faith without nausea! Several felt that with the sacrifice of her universal tongue the Church has lost the universality that held such a strong appeal, especially for Catholics travelling abroad. Once they could go into any RC church anywhere and hear the same familiar sounds: now 'It's babel'.

As for the recent Pop frolics in Liverpool, and imitations elsewhere, the general feeling was that 'the novelty will soon wear off, and be followed by a decline in church attendance'. 'What's the use', someone asked, 'of giving a Pop concert to bring in the thousands who'll come once and never come again?'

If the Church has sold herself to the Pop population, she has tried with equal desperation to measure up to an entity called *modern man*. But, suggested several questioners, do the 'radicals' really know much about him? One reproached so-called 'radical thinkers' as 'commercial travellers *selling* to please modern man'. There is in the Church 'no official voice for advanced thought'. Thus 'clergy, teachers, *avant-garde* laity, think they can say what they like', which increases confusion and bitterness. Many feel that the Council pushed through ideas too rapidly: that 'many decades would be needed for a renewal of doctrine gradually brought about by a synthesis of the old and the new'.

In the present muddle anyone can throw doubt on any item of belief or practice, or cast it arbitrarily aside. For example, some 'radical' decides that 'angels are terribly unimportant' or that 'miracles are out'; or that 'the Real Presence is unnecessary in the Eucharist', which should be an act of commemoration—or an informal meal in somebody's private house (to imitate the Dutch extremists). Thus the less 'progressive' feel that their cherished beliefs are being labelled superstitions.

Vatican II, by promulgating 'individual conscience' and 'religious liberty', 'brought the Church closer to Protestant tradition'. This has, in actual fact, helped to defeat ecumenical aspirations, by increasing Catholic resentment and hatred of their ancient rivals. For many feel that the Church by such concessions, has 'lost her identity'. One speaker condemned the effects of ecumenism as 'entirely deleterious', and accused it of debasing the Church into 'a formless and fatuous pseudo-institution'. On the question of union with the Anglican Church, most RC's seem to feel (as we always knew they did) that 'the only hope for unity is on the Church's terms'. They all see 'the inconvenience of divided Christianity', but 'the habit of being Right' is as dominant as ever!

And this reminds us of an aspect of the Catholic mentality which is, unhappily, always with us. Despite the doubts, distress and sincere self-questioning of many of her children, the aura of 'the Chosen People' still surrounds them. The ghastly self-approval of belonging to 'the one true Church' sets them apart from the rest of mankind in a favoured isolation, or closed shop, which no ecumenical fervour will ever break down. This attitude, so hard for non-Catholics to understand or even credit as a serious

reality, is in the born Catholic like 'grain in the wood', indelible, 'Brighton-Rock engraved'. 'It is crystallised at the age of six or seven, when the child receives the sacraments and learns about eternal punishment'.

Alas, it is from the lips of small children that we learn the real tragedy of Catholic delusion. The innocent twitterings from infant-classes, forgivably confused, unforgivably echoe the arrogance, ignorance, stupidity and cruelty of the monstrous institution to which the poor babies have the bad luck to belong. The big word 'Protestant' popped very frequently from rosebud mouths. Probably the twitterers were vague about the nature of these wild animals outside the Fold; but everyone knew they didn't go to confession like Catholics, and so were likely to be wicked, and wouldn't go to Heaven anyway. One kind-hearted mite did concede 'They're the same as us, really'; but a diminutive Dante despatched them *all* firmly to Hell.

A little later in their spiritual lives these innocents are fed ecumenical sugar-plums, such as 'religious liberty', 'the most precious gift of freedom', 'personal decisions', 'formation of the individual conscience', 'finding Christianity by your own experience', etc. A hideously unctious assembly piece was put on to illustrate 'individual inspiration instead of set prayers' A pious chit-chat on 'caring for others'—the latest substitute for Catechetical parrot recitation—was engineered by a breathlessly self-conscious young female teacher.

These panderings to little 'modern man' lead, alas, to disillusion in adolescence. Graduating in Apologetics does not seem to have the same hale effects as on the suave and

## DIVINE INSCRUTABILITY

FUNDAMENTALISTS, finding themselves increasingly incapable of presenting their beliefs in any plausible, or even consistent manner, are being driven increasingly into a quasi-mystical non-rationality. When closely quizzed on how one is supposed to believe in a God, who being omniscient, can do anything that he wants, and, being benevolent, wishes nothing but good, in the teeth of the all too obvious limitations and imperfections of our material existence, Christians—after having engrossed themselves in more difficulties concerning the wickedness of the world, and the origins of these iniquities—can only retreat to the sacred tenet of Divine Inscrutability. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55 : 8, 9.)

Now all this is true: a God, to be a God, must be of far greater intelligence than any man. So great, in fact, that we mortals can have no clear conception of his plans, for if we had, and shared with God all the secrets of the universe, we, knowing as much as him, would have no need to render him praise and devotion. Therefore, God must be inscrutable, *Q.E.D.*

Unfortunately for Christianity, however, it's not quite so simple as that. For if we accept an inscrutable God, we cannot accept a good one. The fact that God tells us repeatedly in the Bible, what a good and holy God he is tells us only that he is good and honest, evil and mendacious, or completely pathological; it does not tell us which.

I have put this objection to a number of believers of various denominations, who have responded with degrees of naïvety and stupidity highly indicative of their critical

serene Mr Waugh. Although this subject, and even Doctrine, are now conducted as 'discussions', there is (say the partakers) 'a feeling of constraint', of being 'bound to come to the expected conclusions, more or less'. The presiding priest 'always has the last word', and it's the old word: 'priests always stick to the old things, in a nineteenth century way'.

The general idea for adolescents still seems to be 'Sex in any form is a sin'. As one girl put it, 'It's moral priorities upside down: Catholicism without Christianity'. At stated age-intervals discreet sex-instruction booklets are handed to the adolescent: 'They're always too late, and they're no good anyway!' Two guides to moral and modest behaviour were quoted as typical (with rueful amusement): 'If you must sit on a boy's lap, put the telephone directory between you'. 'Stop kissing a boy when you begin to enjoy it: that's when it begins to be wrong!'

One wonders if Dr Ramsey enjoyed this glimpse into the English ward of the Papal madhouse, and what his thoughts were on the possibilities of England's Church entering as a patient. Or does he visualise Canterbury as the Good Psychiatrist applying the latest healing methods to Rome's hitherto incurable monomania?

On a less exalted level, the graceless gang of Free-thinkers gets a glimmer of hope from the spectacle of Thought, however confused, stirring up the mud of mental torpor and animal apathy. And that it should be permitted to express itself so freely in an hour-long broadcast, at a popular listening-time, cheers those of us who dream of the Slug of Rome finally dissolved by the Salt of Reason—even though we shall not live to see it!

A. J. Lowry

faculties. Some have attributed my question to demoniacal possession. Many have offered to pray for me. I have often been told (especially by old ladies) that they, in some way which they refused to reveal, 'knew' that God, even though he was inscrutable, was nevertheless good at the same time. Others have informed me that they asked him was he good, and he responded in the affirmative. Which, of course, all gets us no further than statements in the Bible.

If we were to believe in an inscrutable God what should, logically, our attitude towards it be? We observe that this being, without our consent, created us for his own glory (Isaiah 43 : 7), to live in physical conditions of very dubious benevolence, for a short period of time, after which, the sins we have committed then will very probably entitle us to an eternity of the worst torments this cosmic 'de Sade de luxe' can think up. But God is inscrutable, and all may turn out for the best, the Christian would insist. But in that case, God, being good, would have to pretend to be bad in order that (if we can believe anything he says at all), many will disbelieve in him, and spend eternity roasting for it. (This is similar to the ideas preached in 2 Thessalonians 2 : 11 and elsewhere). Yet such a superb and malignant confidence trickster could hardly, on account of his actions, be considered as anything short of desperately wicked, anyhow. Therefore, whichever way we look at it, God must be bad, and being inscrutable, must be enormously worse than any moral depravity we could envisage.

Such a God, if he existed, would be worthy, not of devotion as the Christian fondly imagines, but of the greatest indignation and hatred our mortalities could engender.

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## ECHOES OF A SCEPTICAL AGE

Elizabeth Collins

SCHOLARSHIP and science having caught up with—and having exposed—the weaknesses of creeds and mythologies, the great sceptics of past ages are beginning to be heard of again. Two recent broadcast events of interest to Free-thinkers and Secular Humanists were the recital by Robert Harris of the “Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām” at 9.30 pm in the BBC Home Service on August 22nd, and “The Road to Kingdom Come” on BBC 2 at 8.30 on September 23rd, both good listening times. The latter programme was the factual account of an investigation of the four principal religious Faiths of the world—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism.

Robert Harris’s reading of the Rubāiyāt would have benefited from extra time—say another ten minutes—instead of being compressed into half an hour. Even so, to be able to listen to this work via Edward Fitzgerald’s translation was a notable and enjoyable event, and it is to be hoped will be repeated more often. Fitzgerald first published 200 copies of the poem privately through Bernard Quaritch, and it was listed in their catalogue as “The Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām Astronomer-Poet of Persia”, but not giving the translator’s name and was priced at one shilling. The hedonistic tone of the poem did not at once appeal to pious Victorians and it was soon relegated to the second-hand bookshops lowest category for sale at one penny! Fitzgerald lamented to Professor Cowell that “nobody bought it”, but he had kept forty copies for distribution among his friends among whom was Tennyson and somehow it came to the attention of Swinburne and Rossetti. Public interest was then aroused, and the price immediately soared until a single copy sold for one guinea and fame was assured. In 1929 in the USA a collector’s copy fetched 8,000 dollars, and in London in the same year £1,410.

There are of course conflicting opinions as to how much of the Rubāiyāt is Omar and how much Fitzgerald. Some Oriental scholars (the majority) think that with fine poetic imagery Fitzgerald has recaptured the Persian astronomer-poet’s materialist philosophy which was typical of that age of sceptics, the “eat drink and be merry” school from the time of Abū Nuwās (AD 810) who specialised in bacchanalian poems like so many Persian lyrics of the age, expressing his ideas of enjoyment in this life in words similar to Omar’s and showing the same spirit although living some centuries earlier, he wrote of flowing streams, of flowers, of wine, and lovely girls. Abu Rūdagi (AD 940 approx.) who wrote eulogies of wine, “where there is no wine all hearts would be a desert waste, forlorn and black” to Abū Shakūr of Balkh (AD 943) who composed rhyming couplets expressing the agnostic attitude so characteristic of the Persian outlook during the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, including that of the famous Avicenna (AD 980—1037) one of the most brilliant scholars of the Moslem world, to whom is attributed the saying that “men of wit have no religion and men with religion have no wit”.

The quatrain was a Persian invention and its most famous exponent was Omar Khayyām. Born at Naishápūr in Khorāsān in the latter half of the eleventh century Omar died in 1123. His learning and scientific work had attracted the notice of Sultan Malik Shah who appointed him to help reform the calendar. The distinguished doctor of Law, Sharastani, who lived for some time in Naishápūr considered Omar to be the greatest scholar of his day, with

exceptional knowledge of philosophy, science, and mathematics and by some considered to be a fitting successor to Avicenna. Omar disagreed with the prevalent creed of the Sufis which was a mixture of Gnosticism and Greek mysticism, in the practice of which it was alleged union with God could be attained. The Sufis in turn anathematised Khayyām’s doctrines and opinions, and although he exercised caution in speech and writing, often concealing his meanings, it appears that at times even his life was in danger. In Sprenger’s Oriental Catalogue, Von Hammer Purgstall alluded to Omar as “a Freethinker and great opponent of Sufism”, and as far as is known the first translation of parts of the Rubāiyāt into English appeared in a book edited by Von Hammer published in 1816 in Vienna.

The quatrains do not represent one continuous poem but express separately thoughts that occurred to the poet at various times written for his own amusement. It is presumed that publication was not intended. Many eminent scholars who have studied the meagre records remaining agree that Omar was a man of independant thought in revolt against the fixed ideas of his time. A

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### SOCIAL AND MORAL EDUCATION

### PUBLIC MEETINGS

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3rd

#### MICHAEL DUANE

(College of Education lecturer; former Headmaster of Risinghill School)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17th

#### DIANE MUNDAY

(Member of the BHA Education Committee)

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1st

#### MAURICE HILL

(Author “Moral Education in Secondary Schools—A Suggested Syllabus”)

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15th

#### DAVID TRIBE

President: National Secular Society  
(Author “Religion and Ethics in Schools” and “100 Years of Freethought”)

MEETINGS COMMENCE at 7.30 p.m.

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comparative examination of Persian originals especially the Teheran MS (AD 1207) acquired by Cambridge University Library 1950, and translated by Professor A. J. Arberry the eminent Oriental scholar, and published 1952, shows that Fitzgerald took some liberties with the text, only about half being faithful to the original, the rest an amalgamation of various quatrains and incorporating ideas from Attar and Hafiz. The Ouseley MS discovered in the Bodleian Library in 1856 by Professor Edward Cowell was written on yellow paper with purple ink and sprinkled with powdered gold, dating from 1460 some 338 years after Omar's death. From this Fitzgerald translated 75 quatrains 'mixing' them as he called it, and admitting in a letter to Professor Cowell that his translation was not literal. Many experts agreed however that by skilful 'transfusion' Fitzgerald had produced a work of great beauty, which, in spite of borrowings and free construction expressed with inimitable poetic imagery Omar's philosophy on love, wine, life and death.

On the other hand there is a minority opinion originating with the Moslem Mystics and revived by certain French translators, that Omar was himself a mystic, and they give the Rubāiyāt a spiritual interpretation. There seemed to be a hint of this in the introduction to the broadcast. Whether the words be those of Fitzgerald or Omar Khayyām himself the critical agnostic spirit remains. Omar belongs to the sceptical time in which he lived, and among the names in the gallery of great sceptics and freethinkers his should surely be one of the foremost. Successors of the Sufis are still with us and their followers still listen for illusory sounds from the non-existent distant drum.

"The Road To Kingdom Come" could almost be called a footnote to the Rubāiyāt. Writing about it in the *Radio Times* James Cameron alluded to it as an "anti-religious" programme looking at the 'outward and visible manifestations' of the four major religious faiths of the world and a comment upon them. Cameron wrote that he saw nothing to change his views that "established and doctrinaire religion had not advantaged the world one whit, rather has it formalised and petrified its injustices". Social progress in his opinion has been most retarded in the more strongly religious countries.

During the 15,000 miles traversed in preparing the programme Cameron says he learned a lot, but to quote his own words, "I emerged from that same door as I went in".

Some 800 years ago the old astronomer-poet of Naishapur said the same thing. Do human beings never learn?

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## LETTERS

### The Charity of Our Silence

ISOBEL GRAHAME might find the *Catholic Herald* more amenable to her taste than the *Freethinker*!

To allow religious crimes the charity of our silence is dishonourable, and unworthy of any atheist.

Being agnostic, she is obviously quasi-religious, and not being in consequence an atheist, forfeits serious consideration.

Her contention that we are not concerned with the problems of NOW, is humorously outrageous!

HORACE FAIRHURST.

ONE of the most pleasing things to me in David Tribe's fine book, *100 Years of Freethought*, was his reference to how Freethought literature for many years has been very conscious of its intellectual and political traditions; Mr Tribe says that the debts to many names of the past hundred and fifty years or so must go unacknowledged in his book—"But one name remains to be discussed: that of Thomas Paine" (and Mr Tribe proceeds to do that honestly and well).

When one considers how consistently the National Secular Society and the FREETHINKER have kept Paine's memory alive—and clean—one realises how loyal they have been to their traditions. This has been an uphill struggle at times, because, when Paine is not denigrated, a cloak of silence is thrown over him.

Freethinkers on both sides of the Atlantic can now prepare to chalk up a major breakthrough in restoring to Paine his rightful place in world history, as this Society has just received news from America that the USA is to issue a 40 cent stamp that depicts Thomas Paine. We understand that it is to be on sale in Philadelphia only on January 29th, 1968 (Paine's birthday), while other post offices throughout the country will be selling it from the following day.

As we believe that a number of people, who want to remember the best of our traditions, will want to obtain copies of these stamps and such philatelic items as first day covers, we are making further enquiries from stamp dealers.

CHRISTOPHER BRUNEL.

### CORRECTION

In the article "Problems of Adoption" by Margaret McIlroy (October 27), the last word of the third paragraph should read schoolmates—not schoolmasters.

## OBITUARY

MR F. La Moon, who died on October 9th, aged 89, had been a member of Birmingham branch of the National Secular Society for many years. He is survived by his wife, two sons and two daughters. Mr W. Miller, branch chairman, conducted the committal ceremony at Yardley Crematorium, Birmingham, on October 13th.

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